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# The Employee Personality Trait That Slowly Destroys Teams—and How to Screen for It

Are you hiring narcissists? They can be high achievers but still damage your organization. How to spot the red flags before it's too late.

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"Why did I hire this person?" It was a question Denise Tran often asked herself in the months following her launch of Bun Mee Vietnamese Sandwich Eatery, a San Francisco restaurant she was determined to franchise.

One of her early hires was the cause of her doubt. She'd enthusiastically brought the person onto her fledgling team of 20 employees. The worker had come highly recommended and dazzled in the interview. The employee "knew all the right things to say, was high-achieving, and had a great resume," she says.

But the shine faded fast. The hire “was emotionally volatile, needing a lot of compliments, a lot of validation,” she says. When the employee made mistakes, they would insist they didn’t do anything wrong, she recalls. The hire also couldn’t stand sharing the spotlight, Tran claims. If she praised another team member in a meeting, the problem hire would take her aside to trash the employee she had praised, she says, and explain why they were more deserving.

Later, in the company’s second year, Tran says she overheard the problem hire taking credit for her ideas and telling her team, “Oh, she doesn’t know what she’s talking about, so you have to listen to me,” she recalls. The problem hire even asked coworkers to call them “boss,” she says.

Tran’s experience could be ripped from the pages of a case study on workplace narcissism. “Narcissists often make terrific first impressions. They’re comfortable talking about their accomplishments, projecting confidence, and taking charge,” says Shoshana Dobrow, management professor at the London School of Economics who studies this issue. “But it’s not the whole story.”

While employees with narcissist traits are easy to hire and often genuinely talented, their dark sides are substantial: hypersensitivity to criticism, hyper-competitiveness, antagonism, general disagreeableness. It quietly degrades a team’s effectiveness, eventually

drives higher turnover, and drains time, money, and morale. “Organizations really need people who listen, collaborate, develop others, and can admit when they’re wrong,” says Dobrow.

In this Inc. article, you’ll learn:

- What to ask in interviews to identify potentially toxic narcissist behavior—and how to score their answers
- The employee check-in you should make a habit and what to look for
- How to confront an employee with narcissistic traits

As a young founder, Tran wasn’t sure what to do. The employee was genuinely good at their job, she says, which made it easier for her to overlook what she could categorize as personality flaws. But she could see it was undermining the collaborative spirit she wanted to foster at her company. Eventually she fired the problem hire after they hid a serious financial error for more than a week, she says.

“It sounds horrible,” she reflects now, 15 years later. And even though Bun Mee did just fine, with multiple locations in San Francisco, and more set to open in Manhattan, the memories of that experience still raise questions in her mind. Not just about why she hired that employee, but why she kept them around as long as she did.

Leaders often tolerate employees with narcissistic traits, just as Tran did. "It's tempting to assume that good task performance, such as increased sales or more efficient work, will be valuable enough to offset the risk of upsetting coworkers," says Emily Rosado-Solomon, management professor at Babson College, and editor of the academic book *Mental Health Challenges and Work*. "But they can create more damage than value in the long run."

So how can you spot potential narcissists before you hire them? And what can you do to prevent damage to your company culture? Here are hiring practices and workplace policies experts say can help.

## Narcissism looks different throughout the org chart

Narcissism has become a staple of pop-psychological analysis, often used as a catch-all for many types of toxic behavior, including dark discussions of a "narcissism epidemic." Although experts still debate its precise meaning and measurement, most agree that narcissism is a common personality trait that exists on a spectrum from healthy self-regard to Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD). (When an employee has this diagnosis, it could become an Americans with Disabilities Act issue, but that's a relatively rare.)

An employee's narcissistic behaviors often fall into a different category than those typically seen in the C-suite, according to recent

analysis conducted by Dobrow, Rosado-Solomon, and Caleb Phillips. Narcissists drawn to leadership positions tend to exhibit the more familiar "grandiose narcissism," which manifests as risk-taking, bombastic bragging, and demands for total obedience.

More typical for employees is "vulnerable narcissism." They're not drawn to the spotlight of leadership and are often more introverted. But they still seek power and ego-gratification through flattery, manipulation, or resistance to the rules.

This can show up as a chronic refusal to follow standard policies and procedures. When one employee joined the 110-person team at Optima Office in San Diego, they clocked in for the first of three days of onboarding training as expected, recalls Jennifer Barnes, the company's CEO. On the morning of the new hire's second day at the outsourced accounting and HR firm, the person told the training staff that they'd had enough. They said, "'I already know everything I need to know. Just put me in front of some clients, and I'll be fine,'" says Barnes. That was only the beginning. She says the hire also ignored Optima's toolkits, wouldn't return colleagues' calls, and filed timesheets late.

Within weeks, "I started getting hit from all sides," Barnes says. Other employees were telling her that the new person wasn't following

instructions, wasn't listening to them, thought their way was better, and that the team didn't like working with with this person.

She was dismayed. "I'd thought this person's background, skill set, and personality were going to be excellent for our clients." The new hire also been lovely to her, she says, saying things like "Jennifer, you've built such a great company. I'm so happy to be here." The flattery was exclusively directed upward, she says, while the new hire created extra aggravation for colleagues.

## How to avoid hiring a narcissist

Preventing narcissistic hires "is easier said than done," says Rosado-Solomon. Narcissists tend to interview well: They're likable, confident, and quick to highlight their achievements. And while pre-hire personality tests may seem an easy fix, she doesn't recommend them: Narcissistic traits revealed by a quiz don't always translate to troubling workplace behavior.

But you can ask interview questions that will flush out narcissistic resistance to criticism, or a tendency to denigrate their colleagues' contributions. Rosado-Solomon suggests asking for specific examples of times when a candidate received constructive feedback, or times they admired a colleague's contribution to a project. (You can find more interview questions to weed out narcissists here.)

As an additional strategy to blunt the effects of narcissistic charm and flattery, she also recommends creating an objective measure to rate the answers to these and other interview questions. For example, on a scale of one to ten, you might assign a one for an answer that's highly collaborative, and a ten for an answer that's very self-involved and braggy. An answer that's actually a boast, like "I don't accept excuses," would score higher for potentially problematic narcissism than one where the candidate describes a genuine effort to understand a colleague's perspective. The goal is to remind the interviewer to pay attention to subtle undertones in an answer that might otherwise be impressive, not to end up with an overall "narcissism score" for the candidate.

## Survey for subtle signs of trouble

The early signs of narcissistic trouble can be easy to miss. Especially as headcount increases, a founder inevitably becomes distant from the day-to-day reality of many employees. "It's a challenge faced by every leader of a scaling company," says Brad Rencher, CEO of BambooHR, in Draper, Utah. "But if you're divorced from the realities on the ground for extended periods of time, you're in a highly dangerous position."

Regular employee sentiment surveys can help. For example, BambooHR conducts an employee net-promoter study twice a year.

“The score is interesting, but what’s more interesting is the [written] feedback,” he says. Even though Bamboo has 1,600 employees, “I will read every piece of feedback that any employee takes the time to write.” He sees that feedback as a gift. And the anonymity means it’s often the first place where the first subtle signs of a narcissistic team member become obvious.

## Protect your company culture

Assuming you’ve made expectations for collaborative behavior very clear in your HR policies, narcissistic behaviors should lead to formal disciplinary action, just like any other performance issue. That’s not to say it will be easy. “It can certainly feel uncomfortable to discipline an employee who otherwise has high task performance,” Rosado-Solomon acknowledges.

You can also expect pushback. During the sit-down meeting that Barnes had with her hire with narcissistic tendencies, she says she diplomatically but straightforwardly shared the complaints she’d received from her staff. Then she listened to the hire complain that too many rules had been “forced” on them, she recalls.

“And I said, ‘You know what? We’ve hired hundreds and hundreds of people, even highly experienced people, and no one has ever done the things that you’ve done,’” says Barnes.

The hire told her, 'I'm an experienced person, and you either accept me as is, or this isn't going to work out,'" she says.

Before she could fire the employee, the hire quit, handing her their work laptop, she says.

That should have been the end of the story. But as Barnes mentally calculated how much this misadventure had cost her (about $4,000, she estimates), she says received a text from her now-former employee.

It was not an apology, but an audacious ask, she says: Would you consider a 1099 relationship where I can still work with your clients, but I don't need to be one of your employees?

That's how full of themselves the person was, says Barnes.

She took a moment to shake her head, before she put her phone away. It didn't deserve a response, she says: "I didn't text back."

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